

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 11, 2026
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong
Gospel reading: Matthew 22:1-14

Let us pray: Gracious God, in love you open wide the doors and welcome us into your presence, whether we are saints or sinners.

You spread a banquet table before us, a feast of love and mercy for the body and soul.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our host and Lord, **Amen.**

Many of us have either hosted a party or was an invitee to a party. Just like the king in today's story that hosted a party for his son's wedding, we may have received a few "decline," to our parties. What was your reaction when you received a "No, I will not be able to attend" response to your invitation? Did you feel rejected, or relieved? How did it make you feel about the person who rejected you? How did it make you feel about yourself?

Today's lesson is about invitations, specifically Christ's invitation to us.

In our lifetime, we have received invitations to many events... Weddings, birthdays, bar mitzvahs, quinceañeras, retirement parties, housewarming parties and the list goes on. I have been invited to many wonderful parties as well, but one invitation stands out in my memory. One day, I received a call from Ruthie, the

General Manager of the Ala Moana Chanel store in Waikiki. Because of the high volume of Japanese tourists who shop there on their vacation, that Chanel store became one of the highest grossing stores among all Chanel stores in the world, allowing Ruthie direct access to the late Karl Lagerfeld, who took over as the Creative Director for Chanel after CoCo Chanel passed away in 1971.

Ruthie invited me to fly to her store to be their illustrator for a special Chanel event to thank their loyal customers. That evening, their store was transformed into Coco Chanel's Parisian atelier at 31 Rue Cambon in Paris. Coco Chanel used to sketch in her atelier, and that evening, I played her role as the illustrator. Every client that attended the event would receive one of my sketches.

Today's gospel takes place in an equally magnificent setting. It was the king's son's wedding! At first reading of today's parable of the wedding banquet, it seems easy to understand, but it is a parable that is often misunderstood. There's a lot of very unusual things happening in this story. Firstly, why did people not want to accept an invitation to such an extravagant affair? Why did the king end up inviting people off the streets who were both good and the bad citizens? Was it to save face? So, we need to understand the context for where this story falls in the bigger story of Matthew's Gospel. Then, look at our traditional interpretation of the parable and a possible new perspective.

This week's parable is about a wedding banquet gone awry and now is steeped in violence. As we learned a few weeks ago, this story was told during what we now know as the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus is slowly approaching his crucifixion at Golgotha. Just recently, the pharisees and chief priests were outraged at Jesus' actions—his spectacular entrance to Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, cursing a fig tree, and cleansing the temple of corruption. The pharisees and the chief priests asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Which in turn is where Jesus tells them the vineyard parables that we heard, and now this wedding banquet story.

Here's the parable.

There is a king who is having a wedding banquet for his son. He sends his servants to announce to the invited guests that the banquet is ready. Come and enjoy! But the invited guests respond in two ways. Some ignored the invitation and kept going about their business, while others respond with violence and even abused and killed the King's servants. The King becomes so enraged, he kills them and burns the city.

Then the king tells the servants to invite people from the main streets and gather them into the banquet hall. The hall is filled and all seems well, until one guest catches the King's attention. The king sees a person who is not dressed for the banquet. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And the guest was speechless. The king had the man bound, hand and foot, and thrown out into utter darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Wow! Isn't that a good host!

If we read this in the conventionally taught way, possibly in Sunday school, youth group, or even in an adult bible study, the king in the parable represents God, the bridegroom is Jesus, the wedding feast is the Messianic banquet, the rejected and murdered slaves are the Old Testament prophets, and the A-list guests who refuse to attend the wedding are God's "chosen people," the Israelites. And the B-listers? Those last minute guests who come in off the streets to fill the banquet hall are us—the Gentiles.

Unfortunately, this interpretation has many flaws. Among them is a false and terrifying depiction of God. As Christ's followers, do we really believe in a God who is so petty, vengeful, hotheaded, and thin-skinned as the king in this parable? A God who casts an impoverished guest into the "outer darkness" for reasons the guest absolutely can't control?

Absolutely not we say, of course we don't believe in a God as monstrous as that.

Or, do we? We sometimes act as if we believe our God is that vengeful.

Yet today, that message is still being preached in many churches. We are surrounded by people who have been victimized by the brutality of religion, many of them bludgeoned by the "Christian" depiction of a God who is angry, withholding, transactional, and perfectionistic. Some of us have LGBTQia friends or family members who have experienced the church as petty, ungenerous, and judgmental. Most of us know a few fundamentalist Christians so narrow-minded and exclusionary in their faith practice that we dare not approach them. And many of us still carry deep wounds from the years or decades we spent appeasing the "king" we mistook for God. But, if we begin with a core commitment to the radical grace, mercy, hospitality, and sacrificial love of God, this interpretation doesn't make sense.

Then, there's another way to read this parable which is historical.

What if Jesus was actually referring to an historical parallel event that happened in the city of Jerusalem that everyone would have known about when he was telling

this parable? Remember I mentioned last week that Jesus is talking to pharisees and chief priests who were equally learned as he was in rabbinical history and laws? Why should we see this parable differently? Because as you can see, his story opens differently from other parables that we have read where he says, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” Instead, here he says, “the Kingdom of Heaven has been compared to a king...”

In this interpretation, the king does not represent God, but represents Herod the Great, back when Herod took over the city of Jerusalem. Before Herod arrived, the Hasmonean family was the ruling family of ancient Judea from 140 to 63 BCE. They were the rightful heirs to the throne. There was a man named Antigonus who was from this family and was the king in Jerusalem for three years before Herod arrived. We need to remember that all of this is taking place under the oppression of the Roman Empire. Herod was made the King of Israel by the Roman Emperor, not by the people of Jerusalem, and they did not want to accept his appointment. He was forced on them.

Herod came to the city of Jerusalem with an invitation. He was going to marry one of **the** Hasmonean women. This was the big wedding feast described in this story. Herod invited the people of Jerusalem to accept his marriage, and to accept him as their king, peacefully.

But, Antigonus advised the people to ignore Herod. Others responded violently against Herod and murdered his messengers. This enraged Herod. He went off, married the woman, then returned with the Roman army and burned down the city of Jerusalem.

He took it over by force and demanded that the people accept him as their king. They were coerced into coming to the banquet. Herod then took over the temple, and started rebuilding the city under his rule.

Antigonus was the principal person that stood up against King Herod. He would not “put on the wedding clothes.” Herod had him bound, hand and foot, humiliated in front of everyone in the city, and executed.

In this parable, it’s important to understand that Jesus is identifying himself with Antigonus, and more so, Jesus is identifying himself as the “Suffering Servant,” mentioned in Isaiah 52. You may know this passage well during Holy Week and Lenten season. This is where Jesus describes himself as a “man of sorrows, a man despised, rejected.”

Being that this parable occurred during Holy Week, **which** interpretation aligns most with the Good News that Jesus has been preaching all along? The angry God, or the suffering servant? The bottom line of both interpretations is actually about an invitation. We have all been sent invitations to the Kingdom of Heaven, the issue is, how do we respond?

So, how do we see this parable with new eyes in 2026? When have you learned something about the Bible that surprised you? How did it affect your faith?

Christ is not the dreaded mean king, but is the suffering servant that is about to die on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. He is ultimate love. He has sent out an invitation to us to accept that love. Let's re-imagine if we responded to his invitation with exuberance and welcoming hearts? How different the outcome would this story be? What might we learn if we attempt to compare God's coming kingdom with our current one? Do we hold onto an image of an angry, withholding, transactional God, or is our God someone who welcomes everyone at the table? Are we willing to extend a welcome to those who show up unprepared, unwashed, and unkempt? Do we take offense when people shy away from our banquet, or do we listen and learn why our invitation strikes them as unappealing or frightening?

Our ministry to the parents of our Children's Center is a good example. God asks us to faithfully promote what we have to them—a place to know God and a place to raise their children. We don't know their situations, they may have another church they attend. They may have issues with God we don't know about. But one thing is clear, they willingly want their children's education here at a church that has chapel. It is our responsibility to invite them to the banquet table, whether they are ready to accept it or not. All we are asked to do by God is to faithfully entrust the gospel to them and let the Holy Spirit inspire them. I've been told by Lauren that the children are going home singing their chapel songs. Parents have requested the lyrics so they can sing along with them at home and they have those lyrics now. These songs are their invitations, and we don't know what these invitations will bring about. But, we do know that we have a short window of opportunity to share the message of Jesus to these young impressionable minds. Paul reminds us in First Corinthians, that some are called to plant the seeds, and some to water the seeds, but it is God who makes things grow.

All of us want to invite our friends and family to know Jesus, to discover God's love for them, but we may all have experienced rejection from our invitations. Don't give up, our benevolent God will use our invitations to call people to his love. It never ceases to amaze me that sometimes people are just waiting to be invited. Each person has their own background and their own time.

You have been invited to share a meal with God. *How do you see God? How does that determine whether you will accept or decline his invitation? Amen.*